THE BIG READ

National Endowment for the Arts

TEACHER'S GUIDE

WILLA CATHER'S

My Ántonia

INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES

NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS

THE BIG READ

WILLA CATHER'S

My Ántonia

TEACHER'S GUIDE

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

A great nation deserves great art.

The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts—both new and established—bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Endowment is the nation's largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.

INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES

The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation's 122,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. The Institute's mission is to create strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas. The Institute works at the national level and in coordination with state and local organizations to sustain heritage, culture, and knowledge; enhance learning and innovation; and support professional development.

Arts MIDWEST

Arts Midwest connects people throughout the Midwest and the world to meaningful arts opportunities, sharing creativity, knowledge, and understanding across boundaries. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 25 years.

Additional support for The Big Read has also been provided by the **W.K. Kellogg Foundation.**

Published by

National Endowment for the Arts
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20506-0001
(202) 682-5400
www.nea.gov

Sources

Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia.* 1918. New York: Vintage, 1994.

Acknowledgments

David Kipen, NEA Director of Literature, National Reading Initiatives

Sarah Bainter Cunningham, PhD, NEA Director of Arts Education

Writers: Erika Koss for the National Endowment for the Arts, with contributions by Philip Burnham and a preface by Dana Gioia

Series Editor: Molly Thomas-Hicks for the National Endowment for the Arts

Graphic Design: Fletcher Design/Washington, DC

Image Credits

Cover Portrait: John Sherffius for The Big Read. **Page iv:** Book cover of *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather courtesy of Vintage Books, an imprint of The Knopf Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York; Field of Wheat, © Royalty-Free/Corbis. **Page 1:** Caricature of Dana Gioia by John Sherffius. **Inside back cover:** University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Libraries Archives/Special Collections.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Suggested Teaching Schedule 2

Lesson One: Biography 4

Lesson Two: Culture and History 5

Lesson Three: Narrative and Point of View 6

Lesson Four: Characters 7

Lesson Five: Figurative Language 8

Lesson Six: Symbols 9

Lesson Seven: Character Development 10

Lesson Eight: The Plot Unfolds 11

Lesson Nine: Themes of the Novel 12

Lesson Ten: What Makes a Book Great? 13

Essay Topics 14

Capstone Projects 15

Handout One: The Homestead Movement 16

Handout Two: Bohemian and Swedish Immigrants 17

Handout Three: The Triumph of Ántonia Shimerda 18

Teaching Resources 19

NCTE Standards 20

"There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land...I had never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven."

—from *My Antonia*

Introduction

Welcome to The Big Read, a major initiative from the National Endowment for the Arts designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American culture. The Big Read hopes to unite communities through great literature, as well as inspire students to become life-long readers.

This Big Read Teacher's Guide contains ten lessons to lead you through Willa Cather's classic novel, *My Ántonia*. Each lesson has four sections: a thematic focus, discussion activities, writing exercises, and homework assignments. In addition, we have provided capstone projects and suggested essay topics, as well as handouts with more background information about the novel, the historical period, and the author. All lessons dovetail with the state language arts standards required in the fiction genre.

The Big Read teaching materials also include a CD. Packed with interviews, commentaries, and excerpts from the novel, The Big Read CD presents first-hand accounts of why Cather's novel remains so compelling nine decades after its initial publication. Some of America's most celebrated writers, scholars, and actors have volunteered their time to make Big Read CDs exciting additions to the classroom.

Finally, The Big Read Reader's Guide deepens your exploration with interviews, booklists, time lines, and historical information. We hope this guide and syllabus allow you to have fun with your students while introducing them to the work of a great American author.

From the NEA, we wish you an exciting and productive school year.

Dana Gioia

Dana Gioia
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

Suggested Teaching Schedule

1

Day One

FOCUS: Biography

Activities: Listen to Track One from The Big Read CD. Distribute Reader's Guide essays, "Willa Cather," "The Model for Ántonia Shimerda," and "Cather and Her Other Works."

Homework: Read *My Ántonia*, the Introduction (pp. 3–6)* and Book One, Chapters 1–7 (pp. 9–42).

2

Day Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Activities: Listen to Track Two from The Big Read CD. Distribute Handouts One and Two from this guide along with the essay "Willa Cather's Nebraska" from the Reader's Guide.

Homework: Read *My Ántonia*, Book One, Chapters 8–16 (pp. 43–91).

3

Day Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Activities: Tell a story by focusing on a significant person from your childhood.

Homework: Read *My Ántonia*, Book One, Chapters 17–19 (pp. 92–106) and Book Two, Chapters 1–5 (pp. 109–130).

4

Day Four

FOCUS: Characters

Activities: Explain protagonist and antagonist. Introduce foil. Perform character review of Ántonia, Jim, Mr. Shimerda, Lena, and the Land.

Homework: Read *My Ántonia*, Book Two, Chapters 6–12 (pp. 131–169).

5

Day Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Activities: Using imagery, write about a childhood memory.

Homework: Read *My Ántonia*, Book Two, Chapters 13–15 (pp. 170–189).

*Page numbers refer to the 1994 Vintage Classics edition of *My Ántonia*.

6

Day Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Activities: Analyze the major symbols of the snake, the crossroads, and the plough.

Homework: Read *My Ántonia*, Book Three, Chapters 1–4 (pp. 191–218).

7

Day Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Activities: Map the development of three major characters: Jim, Ántonia, and Lena.

Homework: Read *My Ántonia*, Book Four, Chapters 1–4 (pp. 221–238).

8

Day Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

Activities: Review the stages of plot development. See if students can identify the crisis, conflict, and resolution of the novel.

Homework: Finish *My Ántonia*, Book Five, Chapters 1–3 (pp. 241–272).

9

Day Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Activities: Develop an interpretation based on a theme: memory, the taming of the land, the immigrant experience in America, or happiness.

Homework: Write outlines and begin essays. Read Handout Three.

10

Day Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Activities: Explore the qualities of a great novel and the voice of a generation. Examine qualities that make Cather's novel successful. Have students review each other's paper outlines or drafts.

Homework: Essay due next class period.

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Willa Cather did not want her novels to be read as veiled autobiography, but *My Ántonia* (1918) parallels many of her life's experiences. Many literary scholars argue that Jim Burden is Willa Cather. For example, Jim and Cather both left Virginia as young children and lived on the Nebraska prairie. Cather's family then moved to Red Cloud a year later; Jim's family moves to the fictional town, Black Hawk. Cather gave her high school graduation speech, as does Jim; then they both studied at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. After graduation, they leave Nebraska for the east: Jim to study law at Harvard; Cather to work as editor at *Home Monthly* in Pittsburgh.

In addition, many of the characters in *My Ántonia* are based on people Cather knew. Most importantly, Ántonia Shimerda is drawn from a Bohemian immigrant, Annie Sadilek (later Pavelka). Cather taught Sadilek to speak English as they played together on the prairie. After the first terrible winter, the Cather and Sadilek families moved to town, where Annie became a "hired girl." Despite Cather's many travels, she and Sadilek remained friends until Cather's death in 1947.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read CD, Track One. Have students take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the CD.

Copy the following essays from the Reader's Guide: "Willa Cather" (pp. 4–5), "The Model for *My Ántonia* Shimerda" (p. 9), and "Cather and Her Other Works" (pp. 12–13). Divide the class into groups, and assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they learned.

Writing Exercise

Read the last paragraph of Chapter One aloud to your students, which describes Jim's first glimpse of Nebraska as he travels by wagon at night. Ask your students to write about a life-changing moment from their childhoods.

Homework

Read *My Ántonia*, the Introduction (pp. 3–6) and Book One, Chapters 1–7 (pp. 9–42). Ten-year-old Jim Burden arrives in Nebraska at the same time as 14-year-old Ántonia Shimerda. Make a chart that describes several similarities and differences about their arrivals in a new land.

2

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

Although life on the prairie was difficult for all pioneers in the late nineteenth century, European immigrants experienced even more challenges than their American neighbors. Use this lesson to focus upon the similarities and differences between the experiences of the Burdens and Shimerdas. For example, the Burdens' house is the only wooden house around except for the Norwegian settlement. At first the Shimerdas do not even have the typical sod house, and they have no garden or tools. As the first Bohemian family to come to Nebraska, they are often cheated financially because they cannot speak English. Mrs. Shimerda later says they never would have survived their first winter without the kindness of the Burdens.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read CD, Track Two. Ask students to take notes as they listen.

Copy Handouts One and Two from the back of this guide, as well as "Willa Cather's Nebraska" (pp. 7–8) from the Reader's Guide. Break your class into groups and ask them to describe specific ways this historical knowledge enhances their understanding of *My Ántonia*.

Writing Exercise

Does life in Black Hawk feel anything like the town in which you were raised? What are the most distinctive similarities or differences?

Homework

Read *My Ántonia*, Book One, Chapters 8–16 (pp. 43–91).

Interview an older family member, asking them about your family's history. When did your family first come to America? Why did they leave their homeland? Gather some songs, stories, or recipes from your family's native country.

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using "I." A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third-person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters' thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

Willa Cather begins *My Ántonia* with an "Introduction" from an unnamed female acquaintance of Jim Burden. After this, the novel functions as a manuscript by Jim Burden, which he titles "*My Ántonia*." Jim records his childhood memories as an adult, reflecting more than twenty years later upon his past. In addition to Jim's narration, there are several stories narrated by minor characters, and Book Four is told almost entirely from the perspective of Widow Stevens. The point of view often changes as Jim moves and grows.

Discussion Activities

Divide your class into four groups. Ask each group to answer one of the following questions, using evidence from the text to support its answers. Each group will then present its opinions to the class.

- As an adult, Jim Burden "is legal counsel for one of the great Western railways," and he is unhappily—though prosperously—married to Genevieve Whitney. How do these adult experiences inform the point of view of the novel?
- Cather once said, "One's strongest emotions and one's most vivid pictures are acquired before one is fifteen." How is this true for Jim Burden? Does Jim romanticize the past? Does he idealize Ántonia?
- Why does Jim title his manuscript "*My Ántonia*"? What does he mean when he says, "It's through myself that I knew and felt her"?
- Do you feel the stories narrated by others—such as the story of the young bride and the wolves—are essential to the novel? Why or why not?

Writing Exercise

Try to imitate Jim Burden, and tell a story about yourself by focusing on a significant person from your childhood. Is this technique easy or difficult?

Homework

Read *My Ántonia*, Book One, Chapters 17–19 (pp. 92–106), and Book Two, Chapters 1–5 (pp. 109–130). Ask students to consider how the land might be considered a character in this novel.

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise

Divide the class into five groups, giving one of the following main characters to each. The group will describe the personality and motivations of its assigned character. Who is the protagonist, hero, foil, and antagonist according to your students' reading so far?

Ántonia Shimerda—Remember that the reader only sees Ántonia through the lens of the adult Jim Burden. What are her strengths and weaknesses, according to Jim? How does his view of her differ from others in the town of Black Hawk?

Jim Burden—Pay special attention to the scene where he "saves" Ántonia from the rattlesnake. What does the novel reflect about his maturity and masculinity?

Mr. Shimerda—What drove him to end his life? What are the consequences for the family, especially for Ántonia? Why does his death affect Jim so much?

Lena Lingard—This Norwegian immigrant is Ántonia's foil, which will become even more apparent in Book Four. How are Ántonia and Lena alike? How are they different?

The Land—Can the land be seen as the novel's protagonist? Could it also be the antagonist? Identify some passages that describe the land with human characteristics.

Homework

Read *My Ántonia*, Book Two, Chapters 6–12 (pp. 131–169). Describe the changing social situation between Jim and Ántonia as she becomes a "hired girl" in town. Why were "hired girls" "considered a menace to the social order"? How do the different ways Lena and Ántonia dance highlight their contrasting personalities?

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually "like," "as," "than," or a verb such as "resembles." A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

Cather frequently uses figurative language. A description of the Nebraska Divide incorporates metaphor, simile, and personification:

> As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the colour of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running.

Cather's metaphors describe the landscape:

> [Sunflowers] made a gold ribbon across the prairie.

Cather uses simile to expand her ideas:

> The grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island.

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups. Assign each group a different chapter from Book One, and ask them to identify several images, similes, and metaphors that are vivid, evocative, and beautiful. How important is figurative language to Cather's writing style? Groups will present their findings to the class, highlighting their favorite example.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to reflect on and write about an important memory of their childhood, using imagery—words that draw on the five senses—to take a reader beyond a literal description.

Homework

Read *My Ántonia*, Book Two, Chapters 13–15 (pp. 170–189). What happens to Jim when he spends the night at Wick Cutter's? Why does Jim respond with hatred for Ántonia?

6

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise

A symbol is a visible object or action that suggests additional meanings. Use this class period to analyze three major symbols in *My Ántonia*: the snake, the crossroads, and the plough.

The Snake (Book One, Chapter 7)
After Jim kills the snake in Book One, he becomes boastful and then considers himself "a big fellow." Why does Jim compare this snake to "the ancient, eldest Evil." To what evil does he refer? Is Jim right to be so proud? The allusion to the Garden of Eden extends this symbol even deeper.

The Crossroads (Book One, Chapter 16)
Mr. Shimerda could not have a Catholic funeral or burial since he killed himself without—presumably—repenting. European folklore taught that the crossroads were the haunts of demons, ghosts, or witches—the only appropriate place for murderers to be buried. Why does Cather choose "Jesus, Lover of my Soul" as the hymn sung at Mr. Shimerda's burial? Why does Jim recollect "in all that country it was the spot most dear to me"?

The Plough (Book Two, Chapter 14)
One of Cather's most famous symbols, the plough "stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun." How does this image correspond to the novel's epigraph? What does this ordinary farm object have to do with Jim's and Ántonia's diminishing childhood?

Homework

Read *My Ántonia*, Book Three, Chapters 1–4 (pp. 191–218). In light of the novel's title, why is Ántonia absent from Book Three?

7

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

Jim Burden recounts his coming-of-age from a backward glance, always weaving into his story his immigrant friend, Ántonia. Willa Cather's characters rarely make long speeches; instead, they reveal their personalities through their actions.

Discussion Questions

Re-evaluate three major characters analyzed in Lesson Four. Ask students to discuss these characters' external changes of setting, profession, and/or landscape. Do these outward changes result in internal change? Have their motivations altered?

Jim Burden
The prairie orphan boy leaves Black Hawk to attend the University of Nebraska, and later Harvard Law School. What does he learn from Gaston Cleric? How does this inform his view of Ántonia and his past?

Ántonia Shimerda
Ántonia leaves Nebraska to get married, only to find herself a deserted woman carrying an illegitimate child. Why does she return to Black Hawk? Does she act in the way you would expect?

Lena Lingard
Lena becomes a well-respected dressmaker in Lincoln and has a brief romantic relationship with Jim. Why does it not last? Why does she remain in Lincoln? Is she content with her life?

Writing Exercise

How does Jim's education remove him further from his past? How does it bring him closer? Discuss the relevance of the novel's epigraph: "Optima dies...prima fugit" (The best days are the first to flee).

Homework

Read *My Ántonia*, Book Four, Chapters 1–4 (pp. 221–238). Consider Cather's choice to structure the novel in five books. Why would she break up her book this way? Identify two important turning points in the novel's action.

8

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

According to Betty Kort, there are three levels to *My Ántonia*: first, the obvious plot line of Jim's and Ántonia's friendship; second, the development of the Nebraskan land; third, the "story-scape," which includes the retelling of myths and stories Cather integrates throughout her novel.

Discussion Questions

Which key events lead to the novel's crisis, climax, and resolution? Discuss the significance of Mr. Shimerda's suicide, Ántonia's desire to leave the Harlings' home, Jim's move to Boston, Lena's move to Lincoln, and Ántonia's return to Black Hawk.

Writing Exercise

Some of Cather's contemporary readers criticized *My Ántonia* for its lack of plot and structure. Do you agree with this opinion? Why or why not?

Homework

Finish *My Ántonia*, Book Five, Chapters 1–3 (pp. 241–272). Ask students to consider the parallels between the Nebraska Divide and Ántonia Shimerda.

9

Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises

Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways. Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements *My Ántonia* makes about the following:

Memory
How is Jim a nostalgic, romantic, and an idealistic narrator? Does this make him an unreliable storyteller? What does Jim mean by the final line of the novel: "Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past"?

The Taming of the Land
By the novel's end, the once virgin land is fenced and filled with roads, houses, and train tracks. What does this suggest about the way humans affect the environment? How is the Nebraskan land both the novel's most significant symbol as well as a major theme? Does the development of the land parallel the development of Ántonia Shimerda?

The Immigrant Experience in America
The heroism of the settlers is evident by their determination to create a new and better life for their families. How do the women especially contribute to making such a life possible? How is this novel a story about the building of a specific Nebraskan community? How does it transcend Nebraska to become a story about the making of America and of what it means to be American?

Happiness
An important moment of the novel occurs when Jim says, "That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great." What does this mean? According to Jim's definition, which characters in the novel end up happy? Is he one of them?

Homework

Have students read Handout Three in this guide. Ask them to begin their essays, using the Essay Topics in this guide. Outlines are due the next class period.

10

Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? In small groups, ask students to discuss specific books that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *My Ántonia*? How is Cather's novel different?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Cather create through *My Ántonia*? What does this novel tell us about the concerns and dreams of those who immigrate to America?

Divide students into groups and have each one choose the single most important theme of the novel. Have spokespersons from each group explain their decision. Write these themes on the board. Are all the groups in agreement?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a persuasive letter to a friend, perhaps one who does not like to read, explaining why *My Ántonia* is a good book. The student should make an argument that explains why the novel has meaning for many people, not just a particular group.

Have students work on their essays in class. Be available to assist with outlines, drafts, and arguments. Have students partner together to edit outlines and/or rough drafts. Provide students with characteristics of a well-written essay.

Homework

Students will turn in a rough draft of their essay at the next class.

Essay Topics

The discussion activities and writing exercises in this guide provide you with possible essay topics, as do the Discussion Questions in the Reader's Guide on pp. 14–15. Advanced students can come up with their own essay topics, as long as they are specific and compelling. Other ideas for essays are provided here.

For essays, students should organize their ideas around a thesis about the novel. This thesis should be specific and focused, with clear evidence from the text to support its conclusion.

1. Jim Burden begins his study of Virgil during his sophomore year of college. What is the significance of the novel's epigraph, and what is the connection between it and his view of Ántonia? Is it important that Lena reenters his life while he reflects on his lesson from Gaston Cleric? Explain.

2. Why does Mr. Shimerda commit suicide? Take into account as many different factors as possible. How does his death change his family's fate, especially Ántonia? Why does it affect Jim so deeply?

3. What double standard do the immigrant women in Black Hawk face? What unexpected results occur because of this standard? How does Jim feel about the "hired girls"?

4. Lena and Ántonia take different paths as adults. How do their personalities and choices in Black Hawk foreshadow their future destinies? By the end of the novel, are they both content? Have they both succeeded? Explain.

5. When Jim finally tries to kiss Ántonia, she pushes him away and tells him never to succumb to Lena's temptations. Why do Jim and Ántonia never have a romantic relationship? Why does Jim pursue one with Lena?

6. How important is figurative language to Cather's writing style? How does Cather's use of imagery communicate the themes of her novel? Focus your essay on one chosen theme.

7. As an adult, Jim tells Ántonia, "I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister—anything that a woman can be to a man," and he tells her sons, "I was very much in love with your mother once." Do you believe him? Why does Jim never try to marry her?

Capstone Projects

Teachers may consider the ways in which these activities may be linked to other Big Read community events. Most of these projects could be shared at a local library, a student assembly, or a bookstore.

1. **Commencement Speech:** Jim Burden gives the commencement speech for his Black Hawk high school, but we never learn what he said in it. You can find Willa Cather's high school graduation speech at: http://cather.unl.edu/ writings/bohlke/speeches/1890.html. Ask students to imagine what Jim might have said to his peers and their parents, and then have the students compose their own commencement speech.

2. **Photo Gallery:** Have one group of students find historical photographs of immigrants on the Great Plains. Then ask another group to find modern photographs of these same areas. The photos may come from books, from the Internet, or from family photo albums.

3. **Immigrants in Nebraska:** Break up your class into the immigrant groups and characters represented in *My Ántonia* from the following countries: Bohemia, Sweden, Russia, Norway, Denmark, and Germany. Each group will prepare a report to present to the class, describing the reasons why the character might have left his or her homeland. What was life like when he or she arrived in America?

4. **In Performance:** Ask students to act out a scene in which they illustrate the hardships of the American frontier, using characters from Cather's novel. The scene may be taken directly from *My Ántonia*, or it can be invented.

5. **Artists' Gallery:** Using the illustrations that Cather commissioned W.T. Benda to draw as examples, ask students to draw or paint a scene in the novel.

6. **Cultural Heritage:** Ask students to collect songs, stories, and recipes from their own cultural backgrounds. Create a class book that reflects the diverse traditions in your class. This book could also include the photography and art of Capstones 2 and 5, above.

HANDOUT ONE

The Homestead Movement

In 1862, Congress passed and President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act. The act provided 160 acres to the head of a household, or to an applicant at least 21 years old, including former slaves, single women, and immigrants. The homesteader had to pay a minimal application fee, live on the land for five years, and make improvements, such as cultivating a farm or building a house. The applicant had to be a U.S. citizen (or a declared candidate for citizenship) who had never borne arms against the United States. Confederate soldiers could not apply.

The Union Pacific Railroad was chartered on July 1, 1862, when President Lincoln selected a route that would pass through Kansas and Nebraska. When the Union Pacific met up with the Central Pacific railroad in 1869, the transcontinental railroad made transportation more affordable. The federal government gave railroad companies large amounts of land to provide incentives for more development. These companies then advertised the sale of cheap land in foreign countries, which often led to unrealistic expectations among non-English-speaking immigrants. These changes—along with the 1862 Morrill Act authorizing land grant colleges to educate farmers—led thousands of eastern Americans and even more Europeans to move to Nebraska and Kansas.

For all its virtues, homesteading had a tragic side. Native Americans were pushed aside as the homesteading wave moved westward. Land fraud was common, especially as non-English-speaking families tried to negotiate with native businessmen or farmers. Large companies applied for multiple homesteads, each one signed for by a company representative until sufficient acreage was amassed for large-scale ranching. Failure was a constant companion. As the homesteaders moved westward into the dry plains, they discovered that 160 acres was insufficient for a family farm. The land was not always cooperative, and heads of families—like Mr. Shimerda and Willa Cather's father—were not necessarily successful farmers. Over 60 percent of homestead applicants never stayed the required five years to get their deed.

The original 1862 act was later amended to accommodate the harsh realities of life on the Plains. Land grants were expanded to a more reasonable 640 acres, and the residency requirement was lowered from five years to three.

The Homestead Act and the transcontinental railroad were benchmarks of American history. By the end of the nineteenth century, over half a million homestead farmers had claimed more than 80 million acres of America. The West was forever changed by the settlement of families who left their homelands for a chance to obtain land to call their own.

Bohemian and Swedish Immigrants

The three novels that Willa Cather wrote between 1913 and 1918—*O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*—center on immigrant female artists from Sweden and Bohemia: Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, and Ántonia Shimerda. Between 1850 and 1950, some 50 million Europeans left their homelands—mostly for North America. What motivated so many thousands of Bohemians and Swedes to immigrate to Nebraska?

Bohemia

Bohemia was a former kingdom bounded by Germany, Poland, Austria, and Moravia. In 1918, Bohemia became the core of the newly formed state of Czechoslovakia. On January 1, 1993, Czechoslovakia was split into two independent states, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The Czech Republic comprises the former province of Bohemia.

My Ántonia begins in 1883, when Bohemia was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A growing Czech nationalism led to ethnic tension between the Czech-speaking population of Bohemia and their German-speaking rulers. Such divisions encouraged many Bohemians to immigrate to the Great Plains, especially since the circulation of railroad company advertisements in Czech newspapers and magazines offered cheap land in Nebraska. Worsening economic conditions and overpopulation pushed most Czechs out of their homeland. Many Czechs relied on weaving industries for their livelihoods, but increased industrialization made it impossible to support a family that way.

Contrary to negative stereotypes, many Bohemian immigrants had education, money, and respect in their homeland. Coming to America—where they were lonely, poor, and often manipulated—was simply too much to bear for many men and women who, like Mr. Shimerda, "died from a broken heart." All told, between 1856 and 1914, over 50,000 Czechs moved to Nebraska.

Sweden

Between 1845 and 1865, severe crop failures and poverty in Sweden—due partly to large population growth—caused the first spike in Swedish immigration. By 1890, approximately 478,000 Swedes had immigrated to America, ultimately reducing Sweden's total population by one fourth. As in Bohemia, economic and social circumstances motivated many to leave. As it became unfeasible to buy land in Sweden, the Homestead Act made such a dream possible in America. Religious persecution, personal misfortune, failing farms, and unfair employment practices led other Swedes to leave their homeland. After the Civil War, Swedish settlements expanded from Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota, to the Great Plains of Kansas and Nebraska. Between 1845 and 1930, over 1.2 million Swedes migrated to America.

My Ántonia accurately reflects some of the difficulties faced by immigrant pioneers, although the novel should not be read as a history book. For example, many early settlers had to survive without wood. Even after the railroad connected Hastings to Red Cloud in 1878, the transportation and price of lumber remained too expensive for most families. Sod houses (built with bricks made from various kinds of grass) attracted snakes and other varmints. Dirt floors and leaking roofs made these homes especially unwelcoming during rainstorms and blizzards. Most families replaced them as soon as they earned enough money from their efforts to tame the Nebraska Divide.

HANDOUT THREE

The Triumph of Ántonia Shimerda

"There was the material in [*My Ántonia*] for a lurid melodrama. But I decided that in writing it I would dwell very lightly on those things that a novelist would ordinarily emphasize, and make up my story of the little, every-day happenings and occurrences that form the greatest part of everyone's life and happiness." —Willa Cather

When Willa Cather wrote *O Pioneers!* (1913), she did not expect anyone to see greatness in a slow-moving Nebraskan novel that featured Swedish and Bohemian immigrants. Most American writers had perpetuated comic, negative stereotypes of these groups, yet in Alexandra Bergson (from *O Pioneers!*) and Thea Kronborg (from *The Song of the Lark*), Cather created strong Swedish women who triumphed in the midst of great adversity.

The character of Ántonia Shimerda especially embodied all Cather's feelings about the early immigrants to the Great Divide. Cather told an interviewer in 1921 that one of the people who had interested her most as a child was Annie Sadilek, later Annie Pavelka, the Bohemian "hired girl" who worked for one of her neighbors: "She was one of the truest artists I ever knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyment, in her love of people and in her willingness to take pains. I did not realize all this as a child, but Annie fascinated me and I always had it in mind to write a story about her."

Since most popular early-twentieth-century novels highlighted the lives of upper-class ladies and gentlemen, it was a radical choice in 1918 for Cather to center *My Ántonia* on a lower-class immigrant "hired girl." Cather always possessed great respect for her immigrant neighbors, and a great deal of her education derived from her German, English, and Jewish friends. She especially loved listening to the stories of the older immigrant women and later said, "I have never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of these old women at her baking or butter-making…I always felt…as if I had actually got inside another person's skin." In several letters and interviews, Cather claimed that housewives and farmers were true artists, once even saying that they contributed "more to art than all the culture clubs."

With this definition in mind, Ántonia is certainly one of Cather's greatest artists. While most women—in both history and literature—were ostracized, exiled, or killed as a result of an illegitimate pregnancy, Cather writes a different ending for her heroine. Ántonia returns to her mother's home "crushed and quiet," but she perseveres, never choosing the path of her father. She farms the land and is not ashamed of her first daughter. The real-life John Pavelka (the model for Anton Cuzak) also defied convention by marrying a "fallen" woman. With him, Annie bore thirteen children, and ten survived into adulthood. When Jim Burden finally returns to Nebraska, he finds his childhood friend "a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination."

Teaching Resources

Books

The W.T. Benda illustrations, reprinted as Willa Cather desired, are featured in the scholarly edition of *My Ántonia*, published by the University of Nebraska Press, edited by Charles Mignon with Kari A. Ronning.

Biography and Criticism

Acocella, Joan. *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000.

Bennett, Mildred R. *The World of Willa Cather.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

Lewis, Edith. *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record.* Introduction by John J. Murphy. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000.

O'Brien, Sharon. *New Essays on My Ántonia.* Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Woodress, James. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987.

Especially for Teachers

Cather, Willa. *Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988.

Curtin, William M., ed. *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970.

Murphy, John J. My Ántonia: *The Road Home.* Boston: Twayne, 1989.

Rosowski, Susan J., ed. *Approaches to Teaching Cather's* My Ántonia. New York: Modern Language Association, 1989.

Urgo, Joseph R. *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995.

Videos

Willa Cather: The Road Is All. The American Masters series by PBS, 2005. (See www.pbs.org)

Web sites

The Willa Cather Electronic Archive
www.cather.unl.edu
This superb site includes a wonderful photo gallery, as well as interviews, speeches, and biographical information.

The Cather Foundation
Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation
Willa Cather State Historic Site
www.willacather.org
Teachers will find many helpful links to the study and teaching of Willa Cather.

For more information about the biannual publication, Teaching Cather, see:
www.willacather.org/teachingcatherpub.htm

Nebraska Studies
www.nebraskastudies.org
The Nebraska Studies site provides information that will deepen your students' understanding of the pioneer experience in Nebraska.

NCTE Standards

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards*

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literary communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

* This guide was developed with NCTE Standards and State Language Arts Standards in mind. Use these standards to guide and develop your application of the curriculum.

"I knew every farm, every tree, every field in the region around my home and they all called out to me. My deepest feelings were rooted in this country because one's strongest emotions and one's most vivid mental pictures are acquired before one is fifteen."

—WILLA CATHER

"That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great."

—WILLA CATHER
from *My Ántonia*

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

THE BIG READ

The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The NEA presents The Big Read in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest.

A great nation deserves great art.

INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES